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Isam's Spectacles

Harry Stillwell Edwards



Isam's Spectacles

ISAM'S SPECTACLES

By

HARRY STILLWELL EDWARDS

AUTHOR OF

"TWO RUNAWAYS," "HIS DEFENSE"
"ENEAS AFRICANUS," ETC.



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GIFT



Isam's Spectacles

ISAM sat on the back steps at Woodhaven, the yard full of the cool, deep shadows of twilight, Helen's little boy by his side, and Major Worthington, as usual, smoking in his great arm-chair, with one of his stout legs peacefully reposing on the balustrade of the veranda. Not far away, in the deep shadow, was Helen, dreaming, with hands clasped behind her shapely head.

The little boy was impatiently shaking the old negro's arm and pleading:

"Please, Unc' Isam! please! You've been promising for a week to tell me how you saved your life with a pair of spectacles."

"Was hit er true story, honey?" Isam scratched his chin reflectively, and the major chuckled.

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"Yes; a true story. Of course it was true if it happened to you, wasn't it, Unc' Isam?"

"To be sho, to be sho." The old man appeared to be studying over some half-forgotten incident. He began slowly and cautiously: "I disremember now perzactly 'bout de spec-ticles. I disremember 'bout de specticles. An' I done save mer life so many times—you don't mean when de bees an' de goat tackled me, an' driv Marse Craffud unner de kitchin, does yer?"

"Oh, no, no, no! That wasn't the time."

"Den dere was de special 'casion," said Isam, dreamily, "when I fought de whole Yankee yarmy out up yonner 'bout Chicken-mauger, an' save mer life, 'long wid er whole waggin-train an' er lot er niggers ter boot."

"Oh, no, Unc' Isam; you know what I mean."

"An' time when I save mer life wid er watch, while Marse Craffud was prac'sin' wid a pistul on Marse Rem Billin's—"

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"No, no; not that. Don't you know you went to town with Uncle Crawford, and they took you to some place where all the doctors stay?"

"Oom-hoo! Oom-hoo! Now I sorter 'gin ter ketch what you been drivin' at. Ef you'd des said docters de fus time, an' not kep' on beatin' 'bout de bushes so long—what ails yer, chile, anyhow?" he asked with a show of indignation. "Whar yer git dat roun'erbout way of not comin' straight out an' sayin' wha' 's on yo' min'? You don't git hit f'om me, 'cause I ain't er man to was'e words; an' you don't git hit f'om Miss Helen, 'cause when she got anything ter say, hit comes straight out. Hit's 'Isam, I want you to hitch up er horse,' or 'Isam, fetch er pail er water,' or, 'Isam, have 'em serve supper'; an' so on. Marse Craffud comes to de p'int in er lope: 'Isam, — yo'—'"

"Isam, don't use such language in the presence of my child!" Helen's voice floated out reproachfully from the shadow.

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"Dere, now! What I tell yer, honey? Ain't no roun'erbout an' com-up-behin'-yer in dat. She know des what ter say, an'—"

The little boy shook the old man with both hands.

"Oh, Unc' Isam, you know what I want. Go on, please—p-l-e-a-s-e!"

"Lemme steddyy erwhile; lemme steddyy. I disremember perzactly whar de specticles come in. Savin' mer life was er special fac'. Why n't yer ask me 'bout dis hyah story 'long time ergo? Big fac's is all right; dey hangs in de min' of man like cockle-burs in es breeches leg, an' he cyan't loose 'em. He sorter feels 'em er-techin' somewhar all time; but dese hyah miser'ble little trashy fac's cyan't be 'pended on no time. Now, in gen'l, specticles is mos'ly er little fac'; you can lay down specticles an' tek up specticles, an' hit don't count fer nothin' on yer min'. Hit's like er ole 'oman fannin' herse'f ter sleep in er

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cheer, an' gittin' her nap out 'thout breakin' her lick."

"You reached out and took them off the table—don't you remember?"

"Seems ter me like I do sorter ketch er little shimmer of hit. I reached out, tuk 'em f'om de table, an' den what? I'm er-stumblin' ergin."

"You reached out and took them off the table, and put them on, and sat up in bed—don't you remember?"

Isam looked at his questioner with wide-open eyes.

"Sholy. I sholy does. Hit all comes back ter me des like hit was yestiddy. But, honey, ef yer know all 'bout dis 'spe'iunce of mine, what yer keep on pesterin' me 'bout hit fer? It ain't ev'y man c'n tell de same story des erlike more 'an oncest. Ef I done gi' yer dis story oncest, an' I tell yer de same story wid er special diff'unce in de tex', yer goin' ter rack roun' dis hyah plantation lettin' on erbout hit

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to Hannah an' Silvy an' 'Mandy an' er whole passel er tattlin' niggers, an' git me drapt f'om de church fer de ninth time. Lemme keep in de norrer paf, chile; don't crowd me, don't crowd me."

"You haven't told me anything but that," said the little boy, earnestly. "You just told me your spectacles were once lying on a little table, and you reached out and took them, and sat up in bed, and put them on, and saved your life. You promised me if I would get you a plug of tobacco out of Uncle Crawford's closet—"

"An' I'm er-goin' ter tell yer 'bout hit right now," said Isam, raising his voice and straightening up. "You got too much sense fer any chile livin', an' dere ain't no way to head yer off, once yer git started. Whar yer want me to pick up de story?"

The major and Helen were silently laughing. The little boy dropped down happily be-

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side the old negro's side, and rested one arm on his knee.

"Tell me all about it—every bit."

"All is er heap, honey, specially when hit comes ter er story what's true. Dere ain't no tellin' whar any story what's true gits hits fus start. Dis hyah story er mine heads erway back yonner'fo' you was born, an' I ain't sayin' perzactly how much more. Hit heads 'long erbout muscadine-time somewhar an' hit come of me gittin' er muscadine-seed hitched in mer vermafooge pendullum." There was a sudden explosion where the major sat, and fire flew from his pipe. Isam looked toward him silently a few moments, one eyebrow twitching silently. "I never tole dis story but twicest befo'," he said, "an' Marse Craffud blowed all de fire outer his pipe at de same place, bofe times."

"But, Unc' Isam, what did you say it was that the muscadine-seed got into?"

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The old man took the little boy's hand solemnly and pressed it against his heart.

"Wha's dat rookus goin' on inside dere? Tech me, tech me! Don't be erfeared ter tech me."

"That's your heart beating."

"Oom-hoo! des so. An' dat's what move all de inside works uv er man, too. Hit's de clock; an' when hit gits outer gear, hit's good-bye, Isam! Go upstairs, honey, 'fo' yer go ter bed, an' look thoo de little roun' glass in de wais' of de big clock in de hall, an' yer goin' ter see somep'n' waggin' ercross f'om one side to de yuther, an' tickin' erway ter beat de ban'—"

"Oh, I've seen that many a time. That's the pendulum."

"Dis boy is sho got sense," said Isam, slowly. "Ain't nothin' goin' on 'bout de place he don't know. Oom-hoo! honey, dat's de pendulum; an' dere's somep'n' inside ev'y man dey calls er pendulum, too—er verma-

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fooge pendullum; an' when hit quits er-work-in', dat man on de outside knocks off erlong 'bout de same time. Ef you don't b'lieve hit, you ax anybody ef dey ever hyah tell of er tickin' inside er dead man, or seen er man up an' goin' erbout when de inside tickin' done quit." This statement was being gravely pondered by the little boy when the old man continued: "De muscadine-seed lodge in de pendullum, an' de fus news I got, de mis'ry ketch me unner the bottom rib on mer right side; an' hit stuck dere, comin' an' er-goin' mo' er less ye'r in an' ye'r out, tell I 'mös' fergit how ter walk on mer heels. Many an' many er time I couldn't more'n git up f'om mer cheer, much less git er bucket er water f'om de well. An' when hit come ter hoein' in de gyarden, de mis'ry was des scand'lous. Marse Craffud is er-laughin' up yonner, honey, ergin, but I'm er-talkin' fac's ter yer des de same. Hit was des natchully too scand'lous ter git erlong wid. An' den come erlong Docter Bailey, one day,

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an' tuk er look at me, an' press es finger hyah
an' plump me dere; an' bimeby he pass his
'pinion dat I'd done got er seed in mer verma-
fooge pendullum. Hit sholy scyared me f'om
de start, 'cause Docter Bailey is somebody
what knows de name of ev'ything on de inside
of er man, an' can cut er man's leg off wid es
eyes shet an' never tek his seegyar outer es
mouf. He knows all de tittlements of what
'flicts er nigger, an' tell him whar he aches 'fo'
he done settle on de spot esse'f; an' des whar
ter drop er little ile, an' when ter brace up
ev'ything wid er dram. An' when Docter
Bailey let on 'bout dat muscadine-seed, an' I
knowed I'd been er-swallerin' 'em forty ye'rs
ruther 'n hunt roun' in mer mouf fer 'em, I
'mos' drapt down in mer tracks, I was so
pluralized wid de shock. De mis'ry got worsen
an' worsen f'om dat day on; an' den dey up
an' say ef dey don't tek me inter town an' have
de seed distracted f'om whar hit done been
lodge, I was sholy er gone nigger. Honey, hit

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tuk me nigh on ter fo' weeks ter mek up mer min', an' de mis'ry helpin' all night. Look like I would n' more'n shet mer eyes 'fo' I'd hyah dat pendullum knock off, an' I'd jump fer fresh air at de winder an' set ev'ything inside er me rackin' erlong like er scyared rabbit. An' in de daylight I got ter goin' in yonner an' wastin' mer time front er de big clock, an' wishin' hit was ole Isam gittin' erlong so steady, tick-noc, tick-noc—so steady, an' hit forty ye'rs ole when Marse Craffud was a baby!

"Well, I drag erlong tell one dey Marse Craffud he git mad an' mek 'em hitch up de blacks; an' he got me inside de coach wid him, an' gi' de word fer town. Bless Gord! 'fo' I had mer min' made up, I was yonner in de horsepit'l, ondressed, layin' up in bed. Dey ain' been er man moved so fas' sence er chair't snatch up ole man 'Lijah. An' dar I lay, full er 'spicion by day an' wrastlin' wid de night-mar' by night. But folks was sho good ter me,

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honey; dey sho was. Dey say I warn't goin' ter be teched fer fo' days, leastwise not tell dey done got me sorter 'conditioned' up to de right pitch; but, oom-m-m! de stuff dey gimme ter swaller!" Isam made a grimace that started the little boy laughing. "Look ter me like de pu' smell of hit was ernough ter stop any town clock in de worl'. An' Miss Helen she come an' fetched er whole raft er pictur' papers an' mer ole spectacles; an' dere I lay an' stiddy 'bout de doin's in de worl' outside—de young 'omen in dey short dresses an' de men in dey woolens goin' in er-swimmin' ter-gyether, an' proud o' hit; an' er ship erfire; an' er whole passel er sojers runnin' er man up er hill what done stole dey flag, I reck'n; an'er railroad injine fallin' off er trestl'. But, chile, I never seed er pictur' of anybody in sech trouble as I was er-havin' over des one muscadine-seed. Dere *was* er man 'long erbout de back of de paper what seem like he was er-sufferin' mightily, f'om de 'spression of his

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face; an' ernuther man right erlong side o' 'im fat an' sassy an' er-laughin' fit ter kill esse'f. I spelled out dat hit was de same man 'befo' ' an' de same man 'after,' an' I say ter merself, 'I don't wonder at 'im, ef hit means er muscadine-seed.' Hit didn't help me much, 'cause I couldn't tell which pictur' was took las'. I laid out ter ask Miss Helen; but when she come, she come er-cryin', an' drapt down dere by me on 'er knees an' 'gin ter pray. Honey, I been scyared er heap er times in mer life, but when yo' mar drapt down dere an' ask de good Lord ter be wid me in mer 'fliction, an', case hit was his will dat I shouldn't be spa'd, ter lead me thoo de valley an' de shadder, well, hit tuk her an' er nigger 'oman an' two young docters ter hol' me in dat bed! Dey never did hol' me tell somebody jabbed me in de hip wid er hipperderme contraption—"

"What was it they jabbed you with, Unc' Isam?" asked the little boy, eagerly.

"Oh, I don't know, chile; hit was some

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sorter little tin squirt-gun wid er p'int like er hornet's tail." Isam rubbed his leg gently and sighed. "When I woke up dey say I done been 'sleep; an' I hyah Docter Bailey say hit's bes' ter break de news ter me. I gyethered that I was er mighty sick man—er mighty sick man! Ev'ybody was stirrin' roun' on dey tiptoe, an' de air was natchully heavy wid trouble. Docter Bailey pass out an' lef' me er-steddyin', an' 'bout dat time I seed de young docters busy in de nex' room, movin' things hyah an' er-movin' things yonner—spreadin' er cloth, clinkin' dishes, an' washin' dey han's in er chiny bowl. So much doin' erbout sot me ter steddyin' mo' an' mo', an' tekin' mo' intrust. I ketch de eye of de nigger 'oman when she pass de do', an' she come close to de bed. 'Chile,' I says, des so, 'you is 'bout de likeliest gal I seen sence freedom. Is yo' sweet name Heartstrings?'

"'No,' she answered me back; 'mer name is des Lucy Ann.'

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" 'Oom-hoo!' says I, 'hit's er name 'mos' as putty as de gal what er-wearin' hit. Lucy Ann, is de white gemmen in de nex' room gittin' mer dinner ready? Seems like I hyah de clink o' dishes, an' ef mer eyes don't fool me, Docter Muckhat'n had er cyarvin'-knife in es han' des now. I sholy would want some dinner, fer dey's been er-feedin' me on promisses fo' times er day fer fo' days, an' I'm natchully hongry. Gord knows I done swallowed ernough "condition" powders ter eat er sawmill steer.'

"Well, wid dat she look at me sorter cu'ious like outer de lef' corner of 'er eye.

" 'Dinner?' says she. 'Dinner?'

" 'Oom-hoo!' says I, 'ain't yer never hyah tell of er man eatin' dinner?'

"She look at me like I done gone 'stracted.

" 'Why, man,' she says, des so, 'dey is gittin' ready in dere ter *perform* on er sick man.'

" 'Lucy Ann,' says I, atter waitin' fer mer

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pendullum ter start ter tickin' ergin, 'is dere anybody sick in dis hyah house?'

" 'Yes,' says she; 'ain't *you* sick, Unc' Isam?'

" 'Ain't nobody sick hyah but me?' says I.

" 'Nobody but you,' she answer back, an' out she went.

"Den I 'lowed ef dere warn't nobody sick dere *but* me, dat all de gittin' ready in de nex' room was *fer* me. I sot up sudden in de bed, an' reach fer mer specticles, an' clapped 'em on, bein' nigh-sighted. 'Bout dat time de youngest docter open er box an' start ter layin' out saws an' long, cu'ious knives an' wrenches wid twisted handles; an' Docter Muckhat'n scratch er match on his right leg ter light er paper chee-root, an' I hyah 'im say, 'Dere ain't much chance fer de ole nigger, but we'll cut 'im open an' see what ails 'im.' Well, honey, I knowed den dat warn't no place fer me. I let mer foot to de flo'; ses I, leg save de body; I slip 'cross de room, an' stuck mer

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foot in mer breeches; I gyethered mer shoes in mer lef' han', an' drapt outer de nighes' winder like er wet towel. I hit de groun', er runnin', an' tek de main road outer town, an' I cross de fiel's like er man's tracks. It come ter my min', when I hit de valley whar de log cross de crik, 'bout how yo' ma done pray fer somebody ter lead me thoo de shadder, an' I quicken mer lick when I look back an' see de sun drap behin' er cloud, an' er shadder comin' erlong on my trail. I was sholy movin'! I done lead dat shadder plumb home in er seven-mile race. I did n' know I was done hyah tell I hit head fo'mos' 'g'inst de back do', an' shuk ev'y winder-pane in de house. Dat's what mek me say as how de specticles save mer life."

"But, Unc' Isam," said the little boy, when he had ceased to laugh, "what became of the muscadine-seed?"

"De muscadine-seed? Well, honey, when I hit dat back do' head fo'mos' I reck'n I des

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natchully swallowed hit funder. Yo' uncle kin laugh, an' yo' ma kin laugh, but I know what I'm er-talkin' erbout. I ain't never been so shuk up in all my borned days as I was when I look thoo dese specticles for dinner, an' seed dem *performin'* instermunts on dat table—'cept when I hit de back do' of dis house. Des one little ole pa'r of specticles," continued Isam, taking off his glasses tenderly—"des one little ole pa'r specticles! An' ter think how *many* times I done *sot* on 'em, an' *drapt* 'em, an' *lef* 'em erroun' for er aggervatin' boy to projec' wid! Hit fa'rly meks me col' f'om head ter foot! When er man cyan't look thoo er do' wid es necked eye an' know de diff'unce 'twixt *performin'* instermunts an' er lay-out fer dinner, hit's time ter tie es specticles on ter 'im. Chile, ef ever yer see dese hyah specticles o' mine layin' erroun' loose anywhar, call me—call me!"

That night, when Isam was closing the

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house, he found the little boy in his night-gown, intently studying the pendulum through the round glass in the "waist" of the great hall clock.

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